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Europeanising education: governing a new policy space

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BOOK REVIEW

Europeanising education: governing a new policy space, by Martin Lawn and Sotiria Grek, Oxford, Symposium Books, 2012, 172 pp., \$48.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-873927-61-8

In this important and thought-provoking book, Martin Lawn and Sotiria Grek set out to analyse the European space of education as a new policy space. Their methodology is distinctly touched by the spatial turn, meaning that the research focus moves beyond national borders and even comparative perspectives. The spatial turn's notable characteristic in education research is that it uses '(...) spatialised approaches to consider the emergence and circulation of educational knowledge' (Grosvenor 2009, 218). This leads to Lawn and Grek's coining of the concept 'Europeanization'.

According to Lawn and Grek 'Europeanization' includes: 'first, transnational flows and networks of people, ideas and practices across European borders; second, direct effects of EU policy; and, finally, the Europeanizing effect of international institutions and globalization' (8). Thus, the research focus of the book, as outlined in the introductory first chapter, is 'the intended and unintended consequences of European processes, and the relational effects of disparate but powerful European agencies and actors' (8). But it might also be described as a focus on the intersectionality between the micro (actors, ideas and practices), meso (national) and macro (EU and international organisations and globalisation) levels of European education. In fact, Lawn and Grek describe their methodology as a '(...) linking of social structures, networks, and actors at the local, national and European levels and, in turn, may reveal the formation of new European identities within emergent policy networks' (53).

Clearly such an approach has implications vis-à-vis which empirical sources are relevant. Lawn and Grek use a wide a variety of empirical sources spanning from interviews with key agents (i.e. staff members), treaties, notes, newsletters, policy documents, web pages and minutes from key meetings. Employing these sources in a carefully considered manor enables Lawn and Grek to construct a persuasive argument and develop a useful characteristic of the contemporary workings of the European education space.

The starting point

Setting out from a historical perspective, Lawn and Grek, in the second chapter of the book, trace some of the central historical antecedents to the contemporary European education space. Key focal points in this connection are education exhibitions, reports on comparative education, trading spaces such as the International Institute at Teachers College, New York, traveller's accounts, popular educational movements and formations of international organisations such as UNESCO, OECD, IEA

and the International Examinations Inquiry formed in 1931, which ‘(...) undertook significant exchanges of data that focused on the pressing policy problem of the selection of pupils for their elite secondary education systems’ (24). Throughout the historical starting point, the book provides a distinct and recurring focus on international sources of inspiration; not least the USA, which played a role vis-à-vis providing financial backing and expertise for some of the initiatives treated in the chapter. Another interesting point made in this chapter is that education even before 1970 had become ‘(...) an essential ‘investment expenditure’ for economic growth’ (29).

The development of ‘a sensitive issue’ and the concept of ‘soft power’

Chapter three makes the overall argument that there was ‘(...) a continuing purpose and a particular solution (...)’ (35) in European educational policy from the 1970s onwards. The key antagonism to the development of a European educational policy space was, however, the national fears of cross-border effects; that the European Union would develop a new imperialism as a consequence of a ‘gradual sovereignty transfer towards Brussels’ (37). This made education policies at the European level a sensitive issue, which did not leave much room for centralised decisions. As a consequence, the development of the European policy space in this period was centred on the emergence of an increased level of bilateral or multilateral cooperation between member states. As stated by Lawn and Grek: ‘The development of infrastructure, close relations and an emerging agenda is important in the history of European education policy, but one of the most distinctive and influential, ideas of this period was cooperation’ (40).

In Chapters four and five, Lawn and Grek focus on governance and the role of experts, policy actors and ideas brokers in the European education space drawing on theoretical inspirations from Michel Foucault and Nikolas Rose (69). One of the key concepts is ‘soft power’, meaning ‘(...) the cultivation of support and the creation of meaning inside and around the idea of a European Union, and its relation to the field of education in particular’ (51). The concept of ‘soft power’ springs from the delicate nature of education policy at the European level mentioned above. But more importantly ‘soft power’ is turned into ‘soft governance’, which Lawn and Grek treat as a relevant form of governance applicable to understand the workings of power exertion in the European education policy space. In making this argument, they focus on the formation of the European Educational Research Association, which facilitated the creation of meaning at the European level. ‘Soft governance (...) attracts and supports associations and networks, as it ties them into programmes and work. It fosters their pursuit of meaning’ (52). Employing this methodological focus, Lawn and Grek are able to identify the existence of transnational networks of agents subscribing to some of the same ideas and ideals based on the construction of Europe: ‘(...) academics and experts, often through their associations, act as new political actors. They are the transmitters and mediators of European Union or European socialization logics, ranging from new procedures, and institutional priorities, to networking discourses, and their associational identities and strategies’ (67). The space of governance is created via the introduction of standards and comparability as well as ‘(...) reports of meetings, project reports, conferences and seminars and the EU’s different directorates’ (71).

The role of numbers and data

Having diagnosed the inner workings of governance in the European education space, Chapters six and seven explore the shift from education to learning and the use of data to develop indicators and benchmarks able to make comparisons between EU member states. The focal points in this part of the analysis are the Lisbon treaty, the Bologna process, the Eurostat and the Eurydice. Lawn and Grek finds some of their theoretical inspirations from Ian Hacking (98) and they denote the emergence of standardised numbers and data ‘a new nervous system which grows across education and which both perceives its functioning and makes it transparent’ (84). The central argument concerning the role of numbers and data in education is that they must be understood as: ‘(...) the deeply penetrating, consciousness-moulding and thus serious business of constructing new categories of (educational) thought and action – the project of re-inventing a ‘new’ European identity of competitive advantage and responsive individualism’ (98).

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the Standing International Conference of Inspectorates (SICI) and School Self-evaluation (SSE)

Although globalisation and global organisations such as the OECD have played a role in the previous chapters, Chapter 8 takes an intricate look at the role of the OECD and its Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). One of the main points made is that ‘(...) the OECD and the European Union should not be seen as monolithic institutions but as part of the global architecture of education (...)’ (130). Analysing the way PISA has impacted national educational fields, Lawn and Grek highlights the cases of Finland, Germany and the UK, and they reach a conclusion saying that the use and meaning of PISA is a ‘(...) a political technology: a governing resource for both the national agency and the transnational forces of the EU and the OECD’ (134).

In Chapter 9, Lawn and Grek draw attention to the role of SICI and SSE in facilitating the travel and embedding of ideas in new national contexts (136). The Scottish inspectorate is used as a concrete case for understanding and establishing the main argument of the chapter. Lawn and Grek argue that the development of self-evaluation in Europe may be seen as a response to problems of infinite data interoperability being disrupted by incompatibilities. Self-evaluation in this light offers the possibility of ‘(...) enrolling communities of practice in processes of constructing compatibilities (...)’ (149).

Conclusions

Lawn and Grek conclude that a unifying search, shared by the EU and its member states, of achieving economic competitiveness and a knowledge economy has worked to expand the role and scope of contemporary European education policies. The mainstays in this development are the creations of standards, numbers and data; but it is also facilitated by unifying myths and ‘(...) the exchange and construction of cultural narratives, across a range of areas, produc[ing] an imagined space, with a future-focused discourse, incorporating national symbols and calculated forms’ (154).

Reflecting upon the book from a methodological perspective, it is striking how the use of a spatial perspective as a way of grasping the contemporary project in European education, demonstrates how a number of important explanatory elements escape the eye of the beholder if purely national or institutional perspectives are retained. Lawn and Grek persuasively argue how networks, projects and associations were important in producing the European space of education; and not least formed important preconditions for the emergence for soft governance as a solution to a delicate political situation where national anxieties about EU 'colonialism' played important parts. In all respects, the book is an important contribution to the research field of education policy.

Reference

Grosvenor, I. 2009. Geographies of risk: An exploration of city childhoods in early twentieth-century Britain. *Paedagogica Historica* 45, nos. 1–2: 215–33.

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